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AMY LOWELL: A PERSONALITY

BY HELEN BULLIS KIZER

"And Deborah, a prophetess, . . . judged Israel."

AMONG our New England foremothers, whose stern energy accomplished tasks which the most strenuous of modern feminists would hardly care to resume, Deborah was a favorite name. Perhaps it voiced a hardly-repressed hunger for empery; perhaps they cherished it as a standing—if unheeded—reminder to their lords that not all the judges in Israel had been men. At any rate, the story of the woman without whom generals refused to go to war, whose word was law to her tribe, who lifted up her voice robustly and sang the achievements of God, Israel and herself in superb, far-echoing strophes, unshamed and unrebuked, must have had a strong appeal for women who bore the burdens of pioneer life and of a terrifying theolatriy equally with their men, yet who were forbidden to be heard in church or state, or even, with open authority, in their own households.

It would be safe guessing that Amy Lowell counts a Deborah among her ancestors; in any case, she is no mean avatar of the Deborah spirit. She sings, she goes to war, she judges. And if she condescends to soothsaying more rarely than did her prototype, it is probably because catalepsy as a means to prophecy has gone out, and the historical method has come in.

In her recent volume, *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, Miss Lowell employs this method with excellent results. It could hardly have been an easy book to write. Sainte-Beuve long ago pointed out that an estimate of his contemporaries is the final test of any man's critical powers, and such criticism is apt to swing between the evil extremes of the "savage and tartarly" and the "appreciative." Miss

Lowell has avoided both formulas. She does not consider a poem as an isolated phenomenon, causeless and miraculous, as a savage regards an eclipse of the moon, but rather links it up with the poet's personality, with his ancestral inheritance and with the circumstances and opportunities of his life. In *Six French Poets* the method was singularly successful, considering the difficulties in the way of securing data; in *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* it is well-nigh completely so. And its success is a tribute to other than the purely critical powers of its author. It might easily bear as a sub-title, "A Book of Friends," for Miss Lowell personally knows the poets she comments upon, and evidently admires and likes them, yet she holds the scales evenly. We feel throughout a spirit of mingled courage, kindness and independence illuminating the subject, and the result is the note of personality that is so priceless in criticism, yet which, unhoneyed on the one hand or uncrabbed on the other, is so hard to come by.

Tendencies in Modern American Poetry is an attempt to range the so-called "new" school that has risen to public notice within the last ten years, though it has been in process of rising much longer than that; in fact, ever since the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock. For its newness is not, as Miss Lowell points out, one of form—the form may be conventional or unconventional—but of the spirit; it is a "revolt against the immediate past." The book takes up Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Frost, Edgar Lee Masters and Carl Sandburg, "H. D." and John Gould Fletcher as poets typical of the main tendencies within this general movement. The first two clothe their new vision of the world in conventional verse; the second two in verse that is generally unconventional, sometimes as ragged and cindery as a ride-the-rods hobo; the third pair in verse that while it is not of "the immediate past," is carefully, even classically constructed. Clearly, it is not form which links them together. Miss Lowell sees them all as "revolting against stilted phrases and sentimentality; . . . endeavoring to express themselves and the new race which America is producing"—she sees them as heralding a poetic renaissance which shall keep pace with the quickened thought and emotion of a nation in social flux within, and brought without into new and thrilling touch with a familiar world suddenly grown unfamiliar.

There are of course other American poets, as Miss Lowell admits in her preface, who share in the reaction against Victorianism dilute, and whose work well deserves attention in any comprehensive review of living authors. But *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* does not aim to be a comprehensive review. Its author follows Shaw in preferring the originaive mind and (it may be) a halting performance, to the unoriginaive mind and (possibly) a complete performance. It is a preference which not only lies at the root of sound criticism but helps to explain why sound criticism is rare. For a perception of what is originaive above that which is merely imitative argues a mind in no small degree originaive on the part of the critic.

With one exception, there can be no quarrel with Miss Lowell's choice of her representative poets. Edwin Arlington Robinson truly enough stands for the old order wrought upon by new influences; "a highly developed, highly sensitized and intellectual product of the old plain living and high thinking generations, throwing off the shackles of a superstition and an environment grown too narrow." Justly enough, Robert Frost, also of an elder tradition, is ranked with the great bucolic poets,—with Burns and Synge and Mistral. And for what may be called the middle period of revolt, no better types could be found than Edgar Lee Masters and Carl Sandburg. But in the last chapter, devoted to "H. D." and John Gould Fletcher, one feels a certain sense of dissociation. It is a good chapter, even a good climax, but not the climax which belongs to this particular book.

The truth is that this last chapter is a "compelled sin." Its author, naturally, could not discuss herself in such a volume, yet of all American writers, it is Amy Lowell who should logically follow after Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, Edgar Lee Masters and Carl Sandburg. "H. D." and Mr. Fletcher have, it is true, written exquisite verse. Their Imagist poetry at its best is as good, perhaps better, than Amy Lowell's Imagist poetry. It would be hard to recall anything that she has written as sculpturally perfect as "H. D.'s" *Sea Gods* or as imaginatively dashing as Mr. Fletcher's "trees like great jade elephants" straining at their chains beneath the wind. But they have let themselves drift into the backwater of formula. Not that formulas in themselves are necessarily evil. The form-

ulas of rhyme and rhythm have helped to swell a noble tide of literature, that of Imagism will add its element of beauty. But like opium, they are deadly to their slaves; only to the man who refuses to be bound by them do they reveal their virtues. If Miss Lowell's book has significance beyond that of a collection of pleasant literary essays, it lies in the tracing of the gradual emancipation of American poetry from the rigidities of "schools," and it is rather confusing to the reader to be plunged in the last chapter backward in fact if not in time, to the consideration of a highly developed, highly restrictive school as the "tendency" toward which the revolts of Mr. Robinson and Mr. Frost, Mr. Masters and Mr. Sandburg are but as milestones along the way.

Amy Lowell herself, on the other hand, is perhaps the least formula-bound poet now writing. She is an Imagist, but she does not see the world exclusively in the terms of Imagism; she feels, and makes the reader feel, its enormous variety. Her historical sense does not permit her to despise the past because it is past, nor to fear the future because it lies around a bend in the road. So she writes freely and flexibly and experimentally, as a poet should who springs from a free, flexible, and experimental people. In fact, a great reason why a consideration of Miss Lowell herself would form a logical last chapter in *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* will be seen if we emphasize, ever so slightly, the word *American*. It is true that she has taken much from the French, but she has, in every sense of the word, taken it home. Other Imagists have taken it away from home. This does not make them less poets—it may even make them better ones—but the "federation of the world" has not yet become so closely knit that national tendencies can be represented on the principle of exchange professorships.

Long ago, as we count time nowadays, Ezra Pound wrote, "Good art begins with an escape from dulness." There can be no question that Miss Lowell's book has escaped; it is interesting from its first page to its last. Its author bears with her no touchstone of poetical values,—that has gone the way of the philosopher's stone—she carries a searchlight. Now and then, to be sure, she seems not to perceive all of the picture revealed by her own beam, notably in the case of Edgar Lee Masters. Now and then, too, a shade of dogmatism obscures it, as when

she says that "Scott's novels are very little read, it is true, . . . less because so many of them are in dialect, as that they are all so largely mere fustian." But these are minor things. What is really important is that criticism of living writers is in the way of being rescued from the desuetude into which it has fallen since the day of Poe.

In style, the book is uneven. Every now and then vivid passages flash out, as the description of the Swedish peasantry from whom Carl Sandburg springs, or of the "strange, faun-like, dryad-like quality" of "H. D.," who "seems always as though just startled from a brake of fern." But Miss Lowell seems to have striven conscientiously against her own ability to write with literary finish, and has achieved in the main a certain plain colloquialism which runs from an incisive vigor that is wholly admirable, at one extreme, to the level of commonplace conversation at the other. While in her poetry she freely admits ideas to fellowship with beauty, in her prose she seems to suspect the association of beauty with ideas.

Although Miss Lowell would probably be called a sophisticated woman, in the sense of having, through an inherited and a personal culture, left the untaught simplicities far behind her, her latest book leaves with the reader a strong impression of the most simple and unaffected integrity. Whether this is the result of an art which has completed the circle, or of a survival in her of the old New England love of directness and of "uncluttered" spaces, mental as well as physical, or whether it is only the working-out of the native judicial temper of a Deborah, does not matter. What does matter is that the impression is as inescapable as it is welcome.

There are still many people and many critics—if the distinction be not an invidious one—who do not care for Miss Lowell's poetry. From the vantage-ground of personal preference it is easy enough to quote at them Mr. Howells' witty remark that "a good thing can be liked only by those who are good enough to like it," but this closes the door. The way to open the door is to search for reasons.

One reason why a portion of the public has looked askance at the author of *Patterns* and *Spring Day* is that they cannot believe that she is as unaffected as she

seems. Is it possible (they ask) that a grown woman can seriously inform the world of the pleasure she finds in watching the spots of dancing sunshine reflected from the water in her bath-tub "wobble deliciously on the ceiling," and in the feeling of the "green-white water, the sun-flawed, beryl water," upon her body? Can she expect us to follow her in her lyrical joy in the clean linen and the shining service of a well-ordered breakfast table and the appetizing savors of its food? If for the bath-tub in a white-tiled room we substitute the ocean or a mountain lake, or if we imagine coffee steam "fluting in a thin spiral up the high blue sky" from the trenches in France instead of through the open window of a breakfast-room in Boston, we should recognize these things quickly enough as the proper material of poetry. But as it is, there is an intimacy about the record of them which, to the conventional mind, seems hardly decent. And although the same mind would doubtless admit the Napoleonic era as a suitable theme for verse, Miss Lowell's treatment of it proves almost as dismaying as her apotheosis of the bath-tub and the coffee-pot. Surely there should be a more elevated chorus to the vast drama of the time than the tap-tapping of hammers!

It is a peculiarity of majorities to tend to dissociate poetry from life, to value it for its oracular qualities—in a word, to push it farther and farther back toward the Python. Once in every generation or two, a poet rescues it temporarily. So did William Blake, so Wordsworth, so Walt Whitman. So every imaginative child rescues it for a day or a year, as far as he is himself concerned, but he is inarticulate, he cannot pass on to others the thrill he gets from the play of sunlight in his morning bath or from the "wheels of white" which dazzle his eyes from a polished silver pot. The poet dies in him precisely as his vitality and his curiosity dwindle. These qualities have persisted with Miss Lowell. She takes no one else's word for the triviality or commonplaceness of a thing, she tests the matter out. If it proves to be actually trivial or commonplace, no harm is done, it is only an experiment which has failed. If, on the other hand, a heart of beauty reveals itself at the unhabitual touch, the world is permanently and incalculably enriched. Miss Lowell is helping to emancipate poetry not only by writing it, but by the spirit in which she writes it. And the more we cultivate a like flexibility of mind in ourselves, the more

we are successful in resuming the vitality and the curiosity which we have "lost awhile," the greater value we shall see even in those poems of hers which we may have been inclined to consider affected or wilfully eccentric.

Another reason why Miss Lowell is unapprehended of the multitude is that she is distinctly a poet of civilization, and she has applied to civilization the touchstones which we are accustomed to see applied only to nature. For the past fifty years poets have been accustomed to find their rapture on the lonely shore; practically all the objective poetry has been nature-poetry. Miss Lowell gives us very little of this. She lives in a man-made world, and her uncompromising conscience will not permit her to write of it as though it were God-made. To the conventional poet the sight of a shop-window full of giddy festoons of red slippers would bring no emotion except a regret that they were not something else, somewhere else—red ivy on a frosted wall, perhaps, or red blossoms in a tropical forest. To Miss Lowell, too, they suggest other objects:—red rockets over a pond, scarlet tanagers, and so on. But she brings them all back to the red slippers, whose glowing color in itself contents her, instead of letting the red slippers lead her to remote, traditionally poetical images. It is not enough to say that she is a realist, it is scarcely half the truth. She is rather a veritist, and a romantic veritist at that, not seeking to relate the fact to the phantom, but to incorporate the phantom with the fact. She accomplishes this by bringing to bear upon the fact, civilized, conventional, artificial as it must be in her accepted world, senses as acute and unsophisticated as those of a savage. Through her poems runs a sensory *leit-motif* which not only relates their parts to each other, but relates the whole to the general experience of the thronged world. Often it is vivid color, as in *Sea-Blue and Blood-Red*; sometimes it is sound, as when in the group of Napoleonic poems she hears, steadily, beneath the crashing of empires, the monotonous tap-tap of hammers, the tearers-down and builders-up of the man-made world, now putting the last touches on a battle-ship, now closing in lead and mahogany the "strange wayfarer" who once was Emperor with his

. . . baubles of a crown of mist
Worn in a vision and melted away at waking.

Naturally enough, it is only by an effort of will and imagination that a poet so far progressed from the primitive as Miss Lowell is can revert to it. In *The Overgrown Pasture* she does so successfully, but these poems are tragedies, and tragedy is the element in the heart of man least affected by civilization. She would be quite incapable of writing a piece of cracker-barrel genre like Robert Frost's *Hundred Collars*, and, in fact, in *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, she characterizes that reflection of the old-time Yankee's dislike of affectation and belief in the natural equality of man as "a little dull—a laborious attempt at humor." She stiffens instinctively at the glimpse of the half-drunken collector:

. . . Naked above the waist,
He sat there creased and shining in the light,
Fumbling the buttons in a well-starched shirt

and she can appreciate neither the man's innate and abounding kindness nor the effective contrast between his human disreputableness and the frigid respectability of the college professor. This is not to say that Miss Lowell is without a sense of humor, but rather that her culture and that of her forbears has constantly tended away from the simpler and cruder manifestations of it until they have become genuinely unrecognizable to her. This is perhaps one of the penalties imposed upon Miss Lowell by her sex. The statement that women lack a sense of humor has been resented by them, and justly so. But it cannot be denied that an enjoyment of the *Hundred Collars* type of episode lingers longer in the cultivated man than it does in the average cultivated woman.

Not only in the profusion and freedom of her utterance, but in her general view of the external world, Miss Lowell resembles another prolific masculine genius—Charles Dickens. She does not show his influence as she shows the influence of Keats, in an occasional poem, except, indeed, in the tale of Mr. Spruggins and his nightmare, which is, quite deliberately, Dickens heightened by Cruikshank. But through the work of both runs the same vivid sense of the interwoven dependence of man and nature, the same quick susceptibility to personality in wind and cloud, to the impact of brilliant color and the rhythm of motion. And here we have a proof of how far personality determines technique.

For though Dickens was as instinctive as a newfoundland and Miss Lowell is intensely premeditative, these common susceptibilities have worked out into curious similarities of method—the “last of the mythologists” meets the first romantic veritist upon the rolling ball of polyphonic prose.

The affinity between Miss Lowell and Charles Dickens begins and ends, however, with this sensitiveness to impression, a trait more physical, perhaps, than mental. Dickens was a lavish sentimentalist, Miss Lowell is a lavish romanticist. Often she seems in danger of the fate that so constantly overtook the elder writer—a keying up of an impression to over-epithet, over-emphasis; but so far she has been saved from it by her balance, her lack of sentimentality, and—a still surer safeguard—by the fact that in spite of the fascination which the shining shells of things have for her, she sees something better and graver beyond them—something which, except in the field of social emotion, Dickens did not see at all.

Somewhere, Miss Lowell has said, “Schools are for those who can confine themselves within them. Perhaps it is a weakness in me that I cannot.” It is unlikely that the possibility concerns her much. Judging from the three volumes of poetry and the two of criticism we now have from her, to say nothing of a fecund output of current verse, little concerns Miss Lowell save that she should not fail in sincerity, in directness, in courage, and in the consistent pursuit of her ideal.

Perhaps not all of these are qualities which immediately occur to most people in connotation of the word poetry. That is a pity. One of the worst counts against formula is that personality hides behind it, conforms to it, through it standardizes itself, so to speak. Free personality and we shall go far toward freeing poetry. Even now, when a long step has been taken in that direction, we have people on the one side still afraid of the new, and on the other, equally afraid of the old. Miss Lowell has said:

New forms are invented to express something which seems inadequately clothed in any of the old forms; but that they must necessarily push the old forms out of existence seems a strangely unhistorical statement. . . .

Some poems come into a writer's mind as expressed in metrical verse, others in the freest of free rhythms. A poet is only true to his art and his “vision” when he follows these subconscious dictates, and writes in accordance with them.

This seems such a reasonable statement that it is not until one thinks back upon poetry in general that one grasps its insidious implications. How many conventional poets of the past have been forced by the originality of their vision to invent new forms to clothe it? How many unconventional poets of the present have a vision whole enough to demand a harmonious and rounded prosody for its expression? In brief, how many are capable of swinging the doors of their personality wide enough to let the idea itself determine the technique of its expression? To do it calls for a particular and rare sort of freedom. Dr. Johnson came near the secret when he advised to clear the mind of cant. Miss Lowell has so cleared her mind—if not completely, in a world of incompleteness, at least conspicuously; and, given this freedom, it is natural enough that her ideas and her forms should follow a wide range. Now, in the "freest of free rhythms," she describes a popular lunch-room; now she relates a romantic tale in strait Spenserian stanzas. Now she offers a psychological study of an episode of passionate crime, now nine pages absorbedly intent upon visualizing for us the motion of a child's hoop.

This diversity of thought and expression is to some extent a drawback to Miss Lowell's popular acceptance. A classifying critic no sooner pins her realism, say, upon his cork, than lo, she soars away, a moth of the ideal. He rebukes her for freakish novelty, and she responds with an irreproachable sonnet. He points out that she is over-intellectualized, and a riot of color and of human passion like *Sea-Blue and Blood-Red* smites him suddenly and he blinks with the dazzle of it. So he puts on a safe eye-shade and writes down, "Brilliant but superficial." The fact is, that though she often lays herself open to criticism with a sort of helpless frankness, she cannot be pigeon-holed. And that is very confusing to the people who are accustomed to say, "Zola, naturalism; Tennyson, music; Mark Twain, humor."

Part of Miss Lowell's freedom is no doubt due to her acquisition of foreign culture, but the important thing is that it has remained a native freedom. This New England receptiveness has been tested before. In the day of Thoreau and Emerson and Longfellow it absorbed an enormous amount of German philosophy and romanticism without apparent discomfort. It is highly significant that long before the war came to alienate us from Germany and incline us

toward France, Miss Lowell had turned to French models and had found in them a fresh force to replace the long-spent German impulse. It was as sure an instinct as that which leads the ailing savage to a medicinal spring. And it was time. During the last years of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth we drifted on an ebb tide. Paul Elmer More comments in one of his essays on the "lack of resistance" which characterized writers of the New England school. That lack was strenuous endeavor compared with the inertia of the men who followed them, for the most part so much seaweed in the currents of formula and commercialism.

But Miss Lowell resists. She leads a new generation of poets who are all of them, in one way or another, resisting, and she has carried her resistance farther than they, out of the region of the "popular movements" with which, as Thoreau says, "God does not sympathize," into the realm of art. This is a direction, of course, in which the French have long pointed the way, and it is a direction from which our Teutonic inheritance of mystical sentimentalism has too long withheld us.

Linked in effect if not in origin with her various resistances, is Miss Lowell's high development of the historical sense. No small part of her value to this generation is her rescue of poetry from the immediate and the personal. If Wordsworth had been writing at the beginning of the twentieth instead of at the beginning of the nineteenth century he might have said, the *time* is too much with us. We have lived too wholly in the present. If we have not felt, like the Bourbon king, that we were the State, we have felt that we were, in a way, history—a history sufficient to itself. And our conceit is recoiling as sharply upon us as the king's did upon his House. Just now, the great war is compelling us to turn back the pages, but we shall forget again; when the poignancy of it is a little removed we shall once more return to the pleased contemplation of our own navels unless our poets, the only prophets we admit, remind us to a farther gaze—the "Debits—credits? Flux and flow through a wide gateway," which is Miss Lowell's vision of the past.

Imagining Miss Lowell herself, for a moment, in historical perspective, her appearance in New England at this

moment has significance. There is no need to dwell here upon the qualities of the old stock that settled and subdued those granite hills from Connecticut to Maine. If we have never felt its flint and steel strike a smothered fire within ourselves, we have seen it in our neighbors, in fiction, or in caricature. But the descendants of the pioneers, we are told, who have not gone West, have for the most part degenerated into "shiftlessness" or incredible morbidity. There is as much truth in this as in most exaggerations. Between the upper and the nether millstones of physical and spiritual rigidities, New Englanders have become the victims of innumerable psychical suppressions. These are plainly visible in the work of Mr. Robinson and Mr. Frost, and we see Mr. Masters, half conscious of them, in *Laocoön* throes of struggle. But Miss Lowell has nearly if not quite escaped. In spite of generations of inhibition behind her, she is singularly free; out of a soil that it is the fashion to call "starved" she draws a passion for color and the glitter of the seasons; as the new psychology "sublimates" desire into thought, she has sublimated her native Puritanism into desire—desire for beauty, for perfection, for the verities of art, and she has turned the compulsion of conscience to the fulfillment of her desire. In a word, she encourages us to believe in a New England renascent.

A well-known American critic says in a recent magazine article:

During the last two centuries, English poetry has accepted a principle which is Spanish or Italian rather than English—the principle of uninterrupted beauty and distinction. . . . The law which governs our poetry today is the acquired and alien law of constancy in beauty with variations and inequalities in life; the ancient and native law for English verse is constancy in vitality with interruptions or disparities in charm.

This statement of the "ancient and native law" fits the case of Miss Lowell as though it had been written of her alone. Whatever "interruptions or disparities in charm" her verse may have, she stands in the great Anglo-Saxon tradition of "constancy in vitality." This vitality, which includes all those qualities and the defects of qualities which make of a man or woman not a person but a personality, transcends the mere line-by-line printed page of her work, and is the spring of the influence she is exerting upon American literature.

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